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硕 士 学 位 论 文

**The Millennial Teeth Issues:**

**Themes and Symbols of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth***

千禧牙事:

论扎迪·史密斯《白牙》的主题和象征

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## Synopsis

Zadie Smith is a young British writer who bursts into the literary scene at the turn of the Millennium with her debut novel *White Teeth*'s (2000) successful receptions, and whose fame and recognition are further solidified by the succeeding novels *The Autograph Man* (2002) and *On Beauty* (2005). This M.A. thesis aims to find out the suggestive solutions that Smith provides through the development of the three multiethnic families' stories in *White Teeth* to the hardcore problems of the contemporary society, and the artistic way she achieves her goal by presenting the novel skillfully.

On the basis of an introduction of background information which consists of the writer and her other works, a summary of the critical responses to *White Teeth*, and of the novel's characters and plot, this thesis makes an elaborate analysis on the themes and symbols of the novel in an attempt to find out the answer to the problems facing a multicultural society at the end of the last millennium. By close textual readings and in-depth interpretations of the novel's major themes in three dimensions: "multiculturalism and Englishness", "history and heritage", and "fundamentalism", it shows that Smith's confidence in the common humanity as exhibited by the deeds of the indecisive Archie and the experiences of his hybrid daughter Irie is the weapon to tackle the problems we are facing, in a world where the uncertainties, unpredictability, and repetition take up much of the normality in terms of individual identity, history and beliefs.

This thesis gives a special chapter for the analysis of the teeth symbol and other stylistic features so as to demonstrate Smith's great inventiveness and powerful narration combined with an admirable sense of humour, explaining the reasons for the novel's sensational performance. The thesis also gives a summary of the value of the novel and its literary contribution from the Chinese point of view. Through analysis and comparison, this thesis finally concludes that *White Teeth* is a well-written

celebration and representation of ordinary people's life in a post-war, post-colonial, and multicultural context; that optimistic outlooks are necessary for viewing the present and the future.

**Key Words:** Zadie Smith; *White Teeth*; multiculturalism; identity; teeth symbols

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## 中 文 摘 要

英国青年女作家扎迪·史密斯凭其处女作《白牙》一书在本世纪初的英国文学界大获成功，而随后出版的两部小说《签名商人》和《论美》巩固了她在文坛的地位。本文旨在探索《白牙》一书丰富的文本内涵之中所隐含的核心提示：通过讲述三个多种族家庭之间的相互纠葛，史密斯为解决当今世界中由种族、宗教、移民等引发的社会矛盾提出了一些解决方法，以及史密斯在达成这一目标时所采用的写作手段和技巧。

本文的论述是建构在如下背景介绍的基础之上的，包括：史密斯的简传和其他代表作品介绍，迄今为止《白牙》的文学批评综述，以及小说的人物和情节简介。在此之上，本文着重分析《白牙》的主题和象征，以回答上述问题。主题方面，本文通过细致的文本分析和解读来检视小说的三个互为相关的基本主题：多元文化与英国性，历史与传统，以及原教旨主义。通过如上分析发现，在史密斯这位生于二战后的女性作家看来，身份认同、历史传统和信念信仰在当今社会的常态是不确定的、不可预测的，而历史的发展形态也是呈环状重复的，因此，可以认为史密斯在《白牙》中通过主人公阿奇及他的女儿艾莉的经历所体现出的对未来的乐观和信心，是来自于对人类共通的人性的呼唤和确信——对史密斯而言，这就是解决我们当下所面对的问题的可能途径。

接下来的关于《白牙》的象征和写作风格的分析揭示了史密斯在文学上的创新性和带有幽默特质的叙述手法。同时也阐释了《白牙》大获成功的原因所在。本文最后总结了小说《白牙》对文学界的贡献，对时代问题的探求，对文学出版的启示，以及从中国角度去审视这部作品可能得到的价值。总之，《白牙》是一部是体现后殖民时代、在多元文化的语境下普通人的悲欢离合的优秀作品，它风趣地审视过去和现在，乐观地展望未来；它有一定的现实意义，也具有较为出色的创作技法。

**关键词：**扎迪·史密斯；白牙；多元文化；身份认同；牙齿的象征意义

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## Introduction

Zadie Smith has been the first millennial sensation in international fiction scene with her literary debut *White Teeth* (2000). At the age of 24, she was in the line with the likes of Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, and Hanif Kureishi. The over 500-page “big, ambitious and contemporary” (Wood, James) novel won Smith a worldwide success, both artistically and financially. The most stunning factor of all about Zadie, was her youngness. She got the contract of a considerably large amount of money for the writing of *White Teeth* on the basis of only one 80-page chapter when she was 21, still a literature undergraduate at King's College, Cambridge University. “She's young, black, British - and the first publishing sensation of the millennium”, as Stephanie Merritt writes in *The Observer* in the very year Smith burst into the public sights. It is interesting and of certain significance to examine how a female writer born thirty years after the Second World War, with a multiethnic background, to interpret the 20<sup>th</sup> century history and to present the world in one multicultural megalopolis as that in post-imperial London around the turn of the century.

The twentieth century has been witnessing the disintegration of a few empires, and the rise of new economic and political centres. As the consequences of the two world wars, the balance of the world powers has gone through adjustments. The former colonized people are gaining more and more significance in the international affairs. Meanwhile, the development in science and technology gives impetus to the gross globalization that inevitably brings benefits and anxiety together to the international society. With the 1990s being the last decade of the second millennium on earth since mankind began to have calendars, prophets and rumours and concerns of our shared future were put on stage. The fast-speed growth and development of human society still could not counteract the negative aspects and sadness of all the conflicts caused by religious divergences, power imbalance, economic inequality, and the mixing-ups of

different races and ethnic groups, among which, the rising of series of fundamentalist attacks threatened the world powers and made them rethink about the sources and their new roles.

In *White Teeth*, Smith examines the millennial troubles with the former imperial centre London as the forefront of all conflicts, assimilations, struggles and happy hours. The way Smith provides a rich text to present the contemporary London scene, and offers an optimistic angle that is full of humanity to view the existing problems, is of my primary concern in writing this M.A. thesis. Besides, I believe the reasons for her huge success are a provocative issue in considering the role of literature in contemporary society, and its publication and marketing.

The intersection of past, present and future is definitely one dominant motif in *White Teeth*, and sometimes in circle-like repetitions. “So *this* was where she came from. This all *belonged* to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond. X marks the spot, and Irie put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and bobs.” (*White Teeth* 400) The concern of this thesis is on the debut novel, by examining things from the beginning, i.e. the “root canal<sup>1</sup>” of Zadie Smith: the starting point from where she elevates into stardom and into her own maturity.

*White Teeth* has been received fervently since its first appearance. But the time span of less than a decade may not be sufficient enough for a newly-burst novel to fasten its stance in the literary world. Though I am well aware of the hazardousness in taking up the novel as the subject of my research for the thesis, I do believe what the critics have achieved so far will provide a substantial ground for me to develop my interpretation of the story. Furthermore, the profundity revealed from reading the novel in the current international environment and from the implications behind the novel's performance will definitely add to the meaningfulness of this survey.

Literature can serve as a mirror for investigation and exploration. One of my major concerns lies in the following points: first, how *White Teeth* indicates a possible

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<sup>1</sup> See page 54 to check the usage of the phrase.

path for us to retrospect on the past, to understand the present, and to greet the future, especially when we are at the beginning of a new Millennium and when we are involved more and more into an integrated, cross-fertilized, heterogeneous international society and thus individual identity will be faced with challenges from multiple sources: a situation similar to what confronts Zadie Smith and the characters she created; and second, how a successfully marketed book like *White Teeth* can be a fun read as well as a profound and serious novel. In a word, my thesis will try to find out what Smith intends to convey through *White Teeth* and how she achieves that outstandingly, and what the significance of the above discussions is to us.

Following the contemplation, in the first chapter of my thesis I will present some of the background information of my survey. I will give an introduction on Smith and her works, in which the analogies between Smith's biography and her novel will be pointed out. Then there will be a summary of the critical reception of the novel from its first publication to the present, around the world, including how it has been received in China. I hope to locate my research in a credible and resourceful stance through the summary. Chapter one will also give a summary of the main characters and plotline of *White Teeth*.

Chapter two is revolved around the three major themes of the novel to find out Smith's attitude or motivation in composing such a multicultural legend. Apparently multiculturalism and the identity issue are two of the major themes. For elaborating multiculturalism, a brief summary of its historical and terminological background will be given, i.e. the immigration history and the introduction of such terms as multiculturalism, hybridity and Englishness, along with the discussion of "a little (dangerous) English education" (W 356), the recurring motif in the third part of the novel. Cultural assimilation and the ambiguity of identity will be discussed as well. Accidents and coincidences function as impetus in the development of the story, and they are partly the components of the past that will shed its influences on the now and then. Therefore "History and Heritage" will be the second focus for examining the

themes, and Smith's views on the circular pattern of historical development and post-colonials' acceptance of tradition will be discussed. Most of the characters in *White Teeth* are helplessly stubborn in believing a certain thing that they go extreme. And that happens to be what Smith endeavors to persuade people out of. "Fundamentalism" with the human intention of controlling is the third theme of crucial importance. Notably all the themes are mutually relevant to each other and more meaningful when considered as an entity. Through Smith's kaleidoscopic lens, we see a colourful London in the lives of the ordinary, mixed-ethnic families where hybridity exists in an everyday context and an immobile Englishness is a vague dream. Smith's warm humanity with the sense of optimism in the novel may suggest a "real" solution. As a supplement, other less important themes, e.g. the emphasis on generations and on gender, will be mentioned briefly at the end of chapter two.

Chapter Three will answer the "how" question by summarizing the stylistic features of *White Teeth*. It first analyzes the teeth symbol in the novel, divided by the symbolic connotations of teeth: as symbols of common humanity, the past, the identity, the purity of mind, and as education and solution. Smith's interactive strategy of the symbol and theme will be elaborated as well. This chapter then gives a brief summary of its style in terms of narrator, tone, language, structure, genre and other literary devices, by which a magisterial authorial stance is established, allowing Smith to exert her talented sense of humor into achieving her objectives in the narration and into carrying on the story at great ease.

In the concluding part, I will summarize my researching work, and point out the value of this survey on the themes and style of Zadie Smith's sparkling debut, especially viewed under new circumstances. I will also point out some defectiveness that might reduce the possibility of the novel to gain its foothold in the long run of literature history, as a piece done by a first-time novelist. Besides, I will suggest some of the areas for future research on the novel.

## Chapter I The First Publishing Sensation of the Millennium:

### Zadie Smith and *White Teeth* Summary

#### 1.1. Introduction to Zadie Smith and Her Works

Zadie Smith was born Sadie Smith on October 25, 1975. She changed her first name into Zadie when she was 14, with no anticipation that eighteen years later “Zadie Smith” would be in 2007 *Vogue* magazine’s top 50 of world’s “Glamorous Women”, and one year before that in the list of *Time* 100 men and women, 2006. “Z” is apparently sharper and impressive than the slippery “S”, which exhibits a prominent character sufficiently proved in the future performances of the carrier in her literature explorations.

Smith was born to a Jamaican mother and an English father in northwest London borough of Brent. Her mother Yvonne McLean immigrated to England from her birthplace Jamaica in 1969. She attended two final years of school in England before working as a typist, model and eventually social worker and child psychologist (Squires 8). Smith’s father Harvey Smith is a photographer for advertising companies and was previously married before uniting with his Jamaican wife. The resemblances of Smith’s personal familial background to that of the protagonist Irie’s in *White Teeth* aroused numerous critical presumptions to take the debut novel as autobiographical in its nature, for Irie being a daughter to a Jamaican immigrant mother Clara Bowden and an anglo-white father Alfred Archibald Jones, especially for the setting of Archie’s occupation as “folds paper for a living” in direct mail business (W 82). Though denied in several interviews the usage of “autobiography” to describe *White Teeth*, sometimes more too eagerly, Smith admitted the details of her personal life contributed to the novel, as she told Merritt in the interview: “*White Teeth* is not really based on personal family experience [...] When you come from a mixed-race family, it makes you think a

bit harder about inheritance and what's passed on from generation to generation.” It is more than natural that a first-time novelist be inspired by the aspects he/she is most familiar with, although in *White Teeth* Smith transcends the limitation by drilling into deeper and wider ranges of history, topography and ethnology.

One of the core locations in the novel is Willesden Green. The three central families, the Iqbals, the Jones and the Chalfens all live in and revolve around a same Willesden Green neighborhood. The community and adding with Cricklewood and Kilburn consists the popular haunts of the novel's characters, and also Brent as a London suburb. Brent, where Smith was born and brought up, is largely a working-class and multiracial area: a perfect back-drop for Smith's multicultural London epic. Pick randomly among the novel's pages, the Hussein-Ishmael butchery, the Palace Indian restaurant and P.K.'s Afro Hair salon add vigorous hue to the verisimilitude of the context in which the plotline develops. Smith confessed in an interview with *The Independent*: “If there's anything autobiographical in it [...] then it's Willesden Green, rather than any of the people in the book.”

Smith's parents divorced when she was a teenager. Then she lived with her mother and younger brothers, one of whom is the hip-hop rapper Doc Brown (real name Ben Smith). Actually Zadie Smith is a fan of hip-hop music, a formerly tap-dancer and occasionally jazz singer. She is familiar with the pop culture of the 80s, 90s and till now, and writes critical essays on the pop icons as Madonna and more recently Eminem. Her understanding to the trend and current issues spiced up the language and narrative of *White Teeth* the way corresponding to what Hanif Kureishi did in *Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). Before being a writer, Smith fancied of being a singer or a journalist. But when she found the instinct to be “original”, “it would be better to write than to sing” as she told Eithne Farry with [Amazon.co.uk](http://Amazon.co.uk).

Askhari Hodari comments in *The Mystique of Zadie Smith* for the September, 2000 issue of *Black Issues Book Review*, Smith “has produced something few would expect from a twenty-something first-time novelist. Golf has Tiger Woods, basketball has



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